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Let's Get the Facts on Nicaragua

Is the C.I.A. Involved?

By Patrick J. Leahy

WASHINGTON — Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams conceded last week that the Central Intelligence Agency reports to the Administration on clandestine mercenary activity carried out by United States citizens in support of the contras. Yet he maintains that the C.I.A. does "not direct it, directly or indirectly, wink or nod, or steer people." I would like to believe the Administration, but I remain concerned that it may turn out to be connected with soldiers of fortune sent to Central America with a wink and a nod and a shrug — sent to get around both our foreign policy and the law.

The most recent incident to arouse my concern was disclosure of an supply operation reportedly run by private "benefactors" from Ilopango Airport in El Salvador. That adventure cost the lives of two Americans and a Nicaraguan and the capture of an American soldier of fortune, Eugene Hasenfus, when a transport plane was shot down inside Nicaragua the week before last.

Something is very wrong here. In 1984, Congress prohibited any United States support, direct or indirect, of the contras. That ban was later modified to allow so-called humanitarian aid, though the C.I.A. was explicitly denied any role in delivering the assistance. This prohibition has not gone down well in the White House. In no other area of foreign policy is the Administration so driven by ideology as in its attitude toward Nicaragua. It is so obsessed with overthrowing the Sandinistas that some officials may have skirted the fringes of the law in circumventing the Congressional ban on helping the contras.

Mr. Abrams, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and even the President have candidly and unabashedly admitted their prior knowledge and approval of private groups collecting money, buying supplies and setting up support operations in El Salvador and Honduras. The President has praised these people, likening them to Americans who fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War.

There are two important questions here. First, knowing that American citizens were providing military supplies to the contras when Congress had barred the Government from doing so, did the Administration try to dissuade them? The answer is clearly a resounding no. Senior officials have boasted that no attempt has been made to stop such activities, and the Administration clearly considered these citizens to be "heroes." As Mr. Abrams puts it, they were "keeping the option alive while Congress made up its mind."

Second, and perhaps more important, did any American officials, acting with the knowledge and approval of their superiors, actively encourage, guide and assist such activities?

As of now, we do not know that answer. Despite the Administration's claims to the contrary — claims that Congress's doubts have been put to rest — I have not received adequate answers to this key question in the Senate Intelligence Committee. I and others in the House and Senate are continuing to ask questions and press for answers. The media have also uncovered much about the tangled web of connections between various Ad-

ministration staffers, usually with intelligence or military backgrounds, and private organizations carrying out the Administration's aims. New information is still coming out.

There is no "smoking gun." The Administration continues to deny any active cooperation with these soldiers of fortune. But circumstantial evidence of official connivance "with a wink and a nod" in the conduct of foreign

policy by private individuals is too strong to brush off with perfunctory denials. No member of Congress, whether pro- or anti-contra, should sleep easy knowing that the spirit and intent, if not the precise letter, of acts of Congress may have been violated.

The Administration's credibility with the American people, Congress and the press has been badly shaken over the last few weeks. It can be re-

stored only by a complete, open and conclusive revelation of all ties, direct or indirect, between Administration officials and private groups aiding the contras. Any illegal or improper activities by United States officials, if they exist, should be severely punished. The Administration ought to be doing everything it can to stop circumvention of the law and the will of Congress. □

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